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ABSTRACT

A study examined dropout data from the 1980 Census and the October 1980, 1982, 1984, and 1985 federal population surveys to assess differences in the dropout and delayed schooling rates for males and females; Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics; and various age groups from 16 to 34. Principal findings include the following: the dropout rate for all youth and young adults fell from October 1980 to October 1985, but Hispanics were least likely to be enrolled or to have completed school. Young Blacks have caught up with White contemporaries in academic persistence. Hispanics drop out at higher rates and earlier than others. Delayed education does not correlate with dropout rates. Family financial need does not correlate with dropout rates or with work experiences after leaving school. Finally, the earning power of the groups is unequal. These findings suggest that too many youngsters, particularly minority youngsters, are leaving school underprepared for meaningful employment and for realizing their potential in society. The data also suggest that more effort needs to be devoted to understanding these problems and to devising remedies for them. It is further noted that school policies may now serve as disincentives to retention and that more attention needs to be paid not only to potential dropouts but also to the preparation of students who may choose higher education. (MSE)

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SCHOOL HOLDING POWER IN THE UNITED STATES

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Dorothy Waggoner

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Youth and young adults in the United States are increasingly staying in school and finishig the twelfth grade. However, there are significant differences in the extent to which minority young people are progressing according to this measure. Differences in the dropout and the delayed schooling rates are indicative of the extent to which U.S. schools are holding and educating minorities and, by implication, of their success in meeting the special needs of these groups. This paper examines dropout data from the 1980 Census and the October 1980, October 1982, October 1984, and October 1985 Current Population Surveys of the Bureau of Census. It compares rates of dropping out for males and females and for Whites, Blacks and Hispanics; and rates for various age groups from age 16 to 34. It discusses the variations in the level of schooling completed by the 14 to 24 year old White majority, Black and Hispanic young people who were not in school in October 1982-- that is, at what stage in their schooling they dropped out. It probes to the extent that some students are older than their classmates, and the poverty status of the families of these young people.

More and more young people are staying in school and graduating from high school in the United States. In October 1970, 17 percent of all teenagers and young adults, aged 14 to 34, were school dropouts. They were not enrolled in school and they had not completed the twelfth grade and achieved that traditional rite of passage--high school graduation. By October 1980, only 13 percent of all 14-to-34-years-olds were dropouts. Among 25-to-29-year-olds in 1970, 22.5 percent were dropouts; among this age group in 1980--people who were 15 to 19 in 1970--13.9 percent were dropouts (NCES, 1982, p.68).

Dropout rates have continued to fall for all age groups as a whole in the eighties, except those aged 25 to 29, who had already surpassed the 20-to-24-year-old cohort in 1980. Moreover, the rates for youth, aged 16 to 19,--the age group of many people making the decision to complete high school or to leave--continue to be significantly lower than those of older age cohorts.

The data on dropouts in the total population of youth and young adults in the United States suggest that schools are increasingly able to keep young people in attendance either to acquire additional skills and knowledge for the

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job market or to prepare for higher education. Unfortunately, the dropout data for the total population are not the complete story. When the data are examined separately for the White majority, Blacks and Hispanics, they show serious discrepancies in the degree to which the schools are holding and educating minority populations.

This paper examines dropout data from the 1980 Census and the October 1980, October 1982, October 1984 and October 1985 Current Population Surveys of the Bureau of Census. It compares rates of dropping out for males and females and for Whites, Blacks and Hispanics. It compares the rates for various age groups from age 16 to 34. It discusses the variations in the level of schooling completed by the 14-to-24-year-old White majority, Black and Hispanic young people who were not in school in October 1982-- that is, at what stage in their schooling they dropped out.

The paper also probes two factors which are frequently related to staying in school or leaving: (1) the extent to which some students are older than their classmates and (2) the poverty status of the families of young people and the employment expectations and experiences of those who leave school early. Data to examine these factors come from the 1980 Census.

The principal findings about dropout rates and dropouts in the eighties which are discussed in the paper are the following:

- The dropout rate for all youth and young adults in the age group 16 to 34 in the United States fell from 14.2 percent in October 1980 to 13.0 percent in October 1985. However, while making gains, Hispanics in this age group are nearly three times more likely than Whites, and Blacks, 1.4 times more likely, not to be enrolled in school and not to have graduated from high school.

- Young Blacks, aged 16 to 19, have virtually caught up with their White contemporaries in the extent to which they stay in school. In contrast, Hispanics in this age group are twice as likely to be dropouts.

- Hispanics not only drop out at higher rates than either Whites or Blacks, but they do so considerably earlier in their education than either Whites or Blacks. Half of the 14-to-24- year-old Hispanic dropouts in October 1982 had no more than a quarter of Whites and Blacks with this level of completed schooling. More than half of Whites and Blacks who drop out remain in school into the eleventh

and twelfth grades.

- Delayed education does not correlate with the proportions of students who drop out. Although Black dropouts remain in school longer than Hispanic dropouts, Black and Hispanic students are equally likely to be two or more years older than most of their classmates and about twice as likely as White students to be older. They begin to fall behind early in the elementary grades and by the eighth grade one Black or Hispanic student out of fourteen is legally old enough to leave school.

- The need of students to help their families financially does not correlate with the proportions of students who drop out. Black students are 3.6 times more likely, and Hispanics are 2.7 times more likely, to come from families with incomes below the poverty level than White students are.

- Financial need does not correlate with the work experiences of dropouts after they leave school. Hispanic dropouts are employed at about the same rates as White dropouts but Blacks are only about half as likely to be employed. On the other hand, Black dropouts are much more likely than either Whites or Hispanics to be "discouraged workers." They drop out of the labor force as well.

- The "pay-offs" of education are unequal. Young Black male high school graduates with no postsecondary education earn 75 cents, and Hispanics, 88 cents, for every dollar earned by similarly educated White males.

The paper concludes with comments on the implications of the findings for U.S. schools. It suggests that the high dropout rates, the low levels of schooling being completed and the delayed education rates of minority students point to the need for more programs which address the special needs of these students and which take into account their differing characteristics, including their language characteristics.

Because the data come from published sources in which the data from the question on race have not been cross-tabulated with the data on Spanish origin, the racial/ethnic groups are not mutually exclusive. The effect of not separating the data for Hispanic teenagers and young adults from those for their White majority contemporaries is slight due to the small number of Hispanics who identify themselves as White relative to the total number of

Whites.

Data from Current Population Surveys and data from the long form of the 1980 Census--the sample of approximately 19 percent of the households in the United States--are subject to sampling error. Differences in dropout rates between groups are said to be significant in this paper if the estimates, plus a minus two standard errors (their 95 percent confidence intervals), do not overlap. Figures in the text display differences in the dropout rates and years of schooling completed by dropouts in the groups studied. The table shows the estimated numbers of dropouts in the 1980s.

School Dropouts In The United States In The Eighties

There were estimated 10.2 million dropouts in the United States, aged 16 to 34, in October 1980. In October 1985, there were an estimated 9.8 million. By 1985, the size of the population, aged 16 to 34, was 3.6 million larger than it was in 1980. Nevertheless, in 1985, there were more than 300,000 fewer people in this age group than in 1980 who were not enrolled in school and had not completed at least twelve years of schooling.

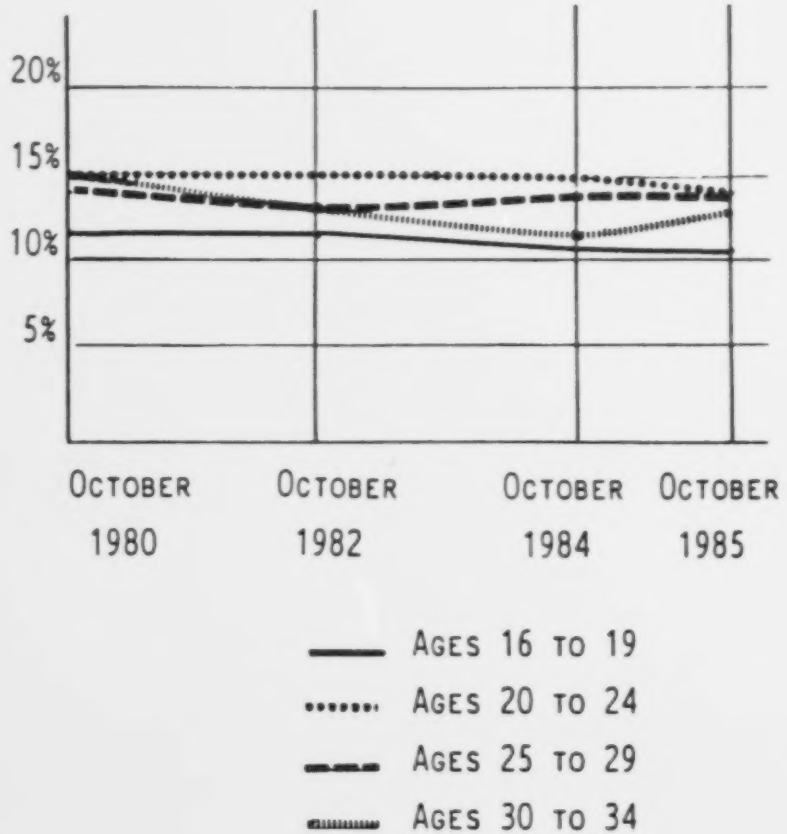
For all individuals, aged 16 to 34, the dropout rate fell from 14.2 percent to 13.0 percent between 1980 and 1985. The group aged 30 to 34 made the greatest gains proportionally--its dropout rate fell from 14.6 to 12.7 percent. Young people, aged 16 to 19 and 20 to 24, also completed high school at higher rates in 1985 than in 1980. The dropout rate of young adults, aged 25 to 29, stayed about the same between 1980 and 1985.

Young people, aged 16 to 19, faced with the immediate decision to stay in school or to drop out, are not only increasingly staying, according to the findings of this study, but their dropout rates are significantly lower than the rates of the older age groups. In 1985, the rate for the 16-to-19-year-olds was 2.1 percentage points lower than that for the second lowest group-- the 30-to-34-year-olds.

Figure 1 displays the downward trend of dropout rates in the 1980s.

Figure 1.--Dropout Rates By AGE Group.

October 1980 to October 1985

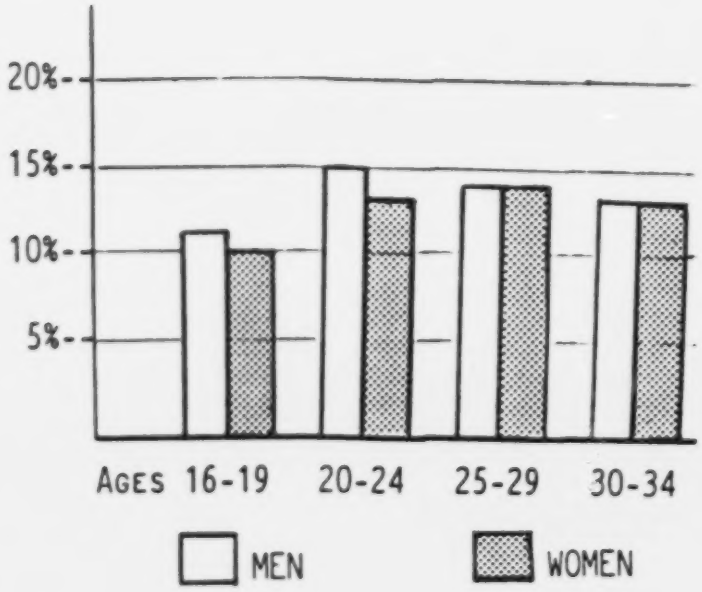


Male and Female Dropouts

High school dropouts, aged 16 to 34, are about evenly divided between men and women. In 1980, each group consisted of about 5.1 million people. In 1985, each was about 200,000 fewer.

Proportionally, young women seem to be completing high school at slightly higher rates than young men, as suggested by the 1985 rates in Figure 2. However, the differences between the dropout rates of men and women, aged 16 to 19 and 20 to 24, like those between men and women, aged 25 to 29 and 30 to 34, are not statistically significant.

Figure 2. -- Dropout Rates of Men and Women
By Age Group, October 1985

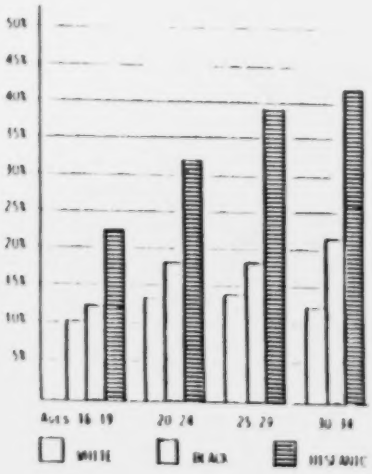


White, Black and Hispanic Dropouts

In contrast to the differences between the dropout rates for men and women, the differences between the rates for Whites, Blacks and Hispanics are dramatic. Hispanics, aged 16 to 34, are nearly three times more likely than Whites and twice as likely as Blacks in the same age group not to have completed twelve years of schooling. Blacks are 1.4 times more likely than Whites in this age group to have left school early. All groups as a whole made gains between 1980 and 1985, but because they started with higher dropout rates, Blacks and Hispanics in the age group 16 to 34 as a whole in the mid-eighties remain substantially behind White youth and young adults in the extent to which they are high school graduates.

The number of Hispanic dropouts, aged 16 to 34, increased from 1.9 million in October 1980 to 2.1 million in October 1985, despite the improvement in their dropout rate, because the total Hispanic population, aged 16 to 34, increased. The numbers of White dropouts fell from 8.1 million to 7.8 million; those of Black dropouts from 1.8 million to 1.7 million. As a proportion of the total number of dropouts, Hispanics constituted 18 percent in 1980 and 22 percent in 1985. The White proportion stayed about the same. The Black proportion fell a percentage point-- from 18 percent to 17 percent. Figure 3 compares the dropout rates of Whites, Blacks and Hispanics in the various age groups in 1985.

Figure 3.--Drop Out Rates of Whites, Blacks and Hispanics
By Age Group, October 1985

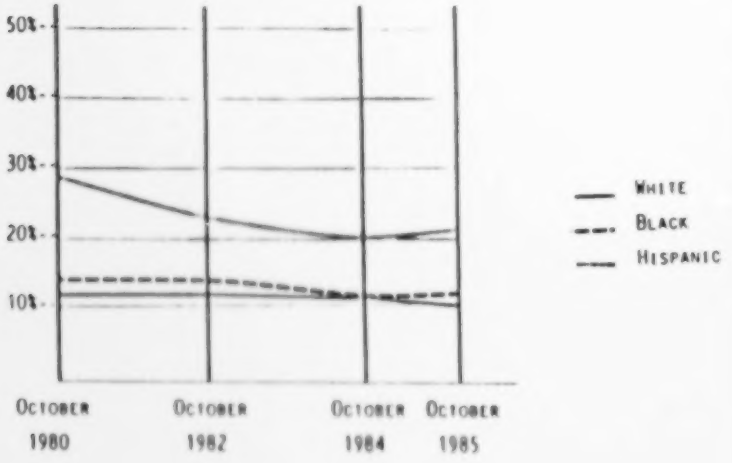


Sixteen-to-Nineteen-Year-Old Dropouts

The most striking finding about the 16 to 19-year-olds in the eighties is the extent to which Blacks in this age group are staying in school. Almost as many, proportionally, young Blacks as young Whites, aged 16 to 19, are still enrolled or have completed twelve years of schooling. Because many Blacks are behind in their schooling, some of these youth will still become dropouts. However, in contrast to young Blacks, aged 16 to 19 in 1970, who were twice as likely as their White contemporaries to have left school without finishing the twelfth grade (NCES 1982:68), by 1980 Blacks in this age group have virtually closed the gap on this measure and they have kept up with Whites since then. In comparison, young Hispanics were twice as likely as Whites and Blacks to be dropouts in 1980 and they have made little significant progress. The dropout rate for young Whites fell from one in eight in 1980 to one in ten in 1985.

Figure 4 displays the dropout rates of White, Black and Hispanic youngsters, aged 16 to 19, from October 1980 to October 1985.

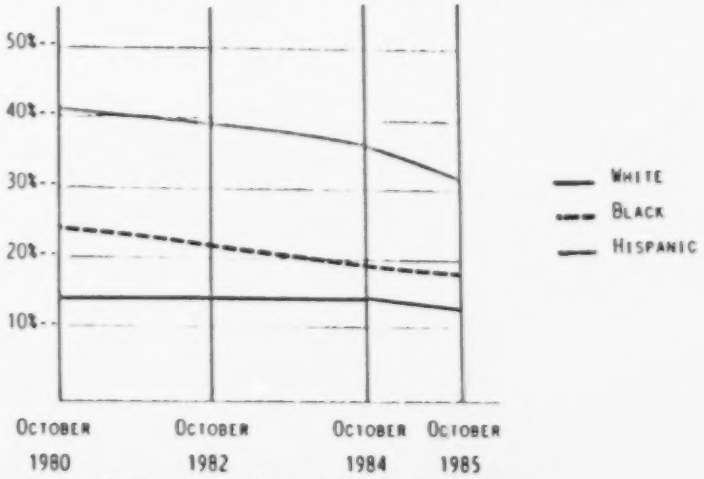
Figure 4.--Dropout Rates of 16 to 19 Year Olds
By Racial/Ethnic Group, October 1980 to October 1985



Twenty-to-Twenty-Four-Year-Old Dropout

Blacks and Hispanics, aged 20 to 24, have made significant gains between October 1985, as measured by their dropout rates. However, as with the 16-to-19 year-olds, Blacks are ahead of Hispanics in catching up with their White contemporaries. In comparison with one in seven Whites who was not enrolled and not a high school graduate, one in six Blacks and one in three Hispanics was not enrolled and not a graduate in October 1985. Dropout rates of the 20-to-24-year-old members of all three groups were significantly higher than the rates of the 16-to-19- year-olds. The dropout rates of 20-to-24-year-old Whites, Blacks and Hispanics from October 1985 are displayed in Figure 5.

Figure 5.--Dropout Rates of 20 to 24 Year Olds
By Racial/Ethnic Group, October 1980 to October 1985



Twenty-Five-To-Twenty-Nine-Year-Old Dropouts

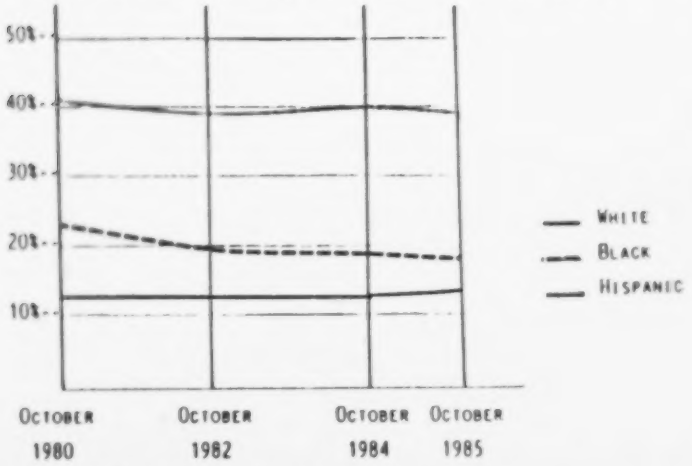
The dropout rate of Blacks, aged 25 to 29, improved between October 1980 and October 1985. In 1980, one of four Blacks in this age group had failed to complete high school. In 1985, one in six, was a dropout. This was about the same rate as Blacks in the age group 20 to 24 in 1985. The dropout rates of Whites and Hispanics, aged 25 to 29, stayed about the same between 1980 and 1985. However, comparison of the 1985 rate of Hispanics in this age group with that of Hispanics, aged 20 to 24 in 1985, seemed to indicate an improvement. In 198[illegible] fewer than one in three of the younger Hispanics was

a dropout; two in five of the 25-to-29- year-olds were. The dropout rate of White adults in the 25-to- 29-year-old age group appears to have evened out at between 13 and 14 percent--about one in seven.

Hispanics in the age group 25 to 29 were more than three times more likely not to be high school graduates than their White contemporaries and more than twice as likely as Blacks in 1985. They constituted nearly a quarter of the three million adults, aged 25 to 29 in 1985, who were not enrolled in school and had not completed twelfth grade.

Figure 6 shows the dropout rates for the 25-to-29-year-old Whites, Blacks and Hispanics from October 1980 to October 1985.

Figure 6.--Dropout Rates of 25-29 Year Olds
By Racial/Ethnic Group, October 1980 to October 1985 .



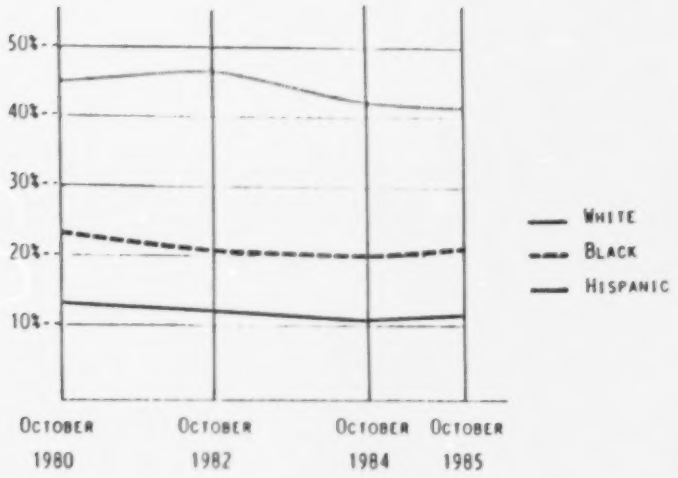
Thirty-To-Thirty-Four-Year-Old Dropouts

Hispanics, aged 30 to 34, are nearly four times more likely than their White contemporaries and twice as likely as Blacks in the same age group not to have completed twelve years of schooling. In October 1980, 46 percent of 30-to-34-year-old Hispanics and, in October 1985, two in five was a school dropout. Among Blacks, aged 30 to 34 in 1980, one in four was a dropout and in 1985 one in five was.

Figure 7 displays the dropout rates for the 30-to-34-year old Whites, Blacks and Hispanics from October 1980 to October 1985.

Figure 7.--Dropout Rates of 30 to 34 Year Olds

By Racial/Ethnic Group, October 1980 to October 1985

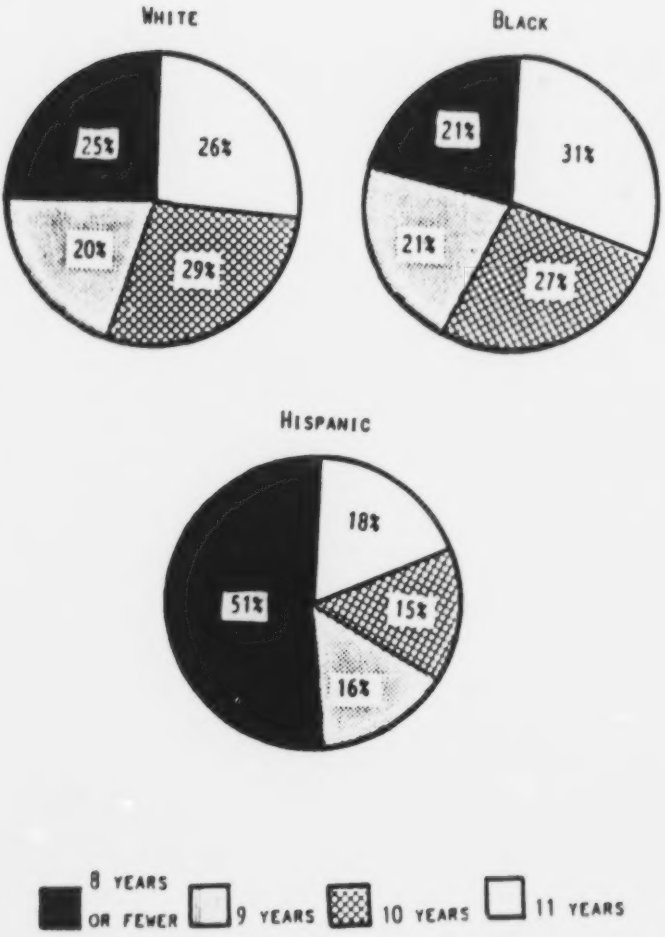


Years of Schooling Completed By Dropouts

The differences in the years of schooling completed by White, Black and Hispanic dropouts are even more startling than the differences in their dropout rates. Not only do Hispanics drop out of school disproportionately in comparison with Whites and Blacks, but they leave at earlier stages in their education. In October 1982, half of the Hispanic dropouts, aged 14 to 24, had completed no more than eight years of schooling when they left school. In contrast, a quarter or fewer of the White and Black dropouts had failed to complete at least the elementary grades and more than half had advanced into the eleventh and twelfth grades before they left school. These proportions are displayed in Figure 8.

Figure 8.--Years of Schooling Completed

By White, Black and Hispanic
14-24 Year Old Dropouts: October 1982



With the data available for this study, it is not possible to examine how many dropouts actually stay in school even through the eighth grade. According to a special analysis of the 1980 Census data for the State of Texas, 10 percent of Hispanic dropouts, aged 16 to 24, in that state had between five and eight years when they left school. These rates contrasted with 2 percent and 16 percent of White non-Hispanic dropouts and 3 percent and 14 percent of Black non-Hispanic dropouts in the same age group in Texas in 1980 (Waggoner 1986b).

Delayed Education in The United States

Citing the "host of difficulties" that can result when students are enrolled in classrooms with students younger than they are, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission stated in 1978 that "it should come as no surprise if it is found that those kept behind in school are more likely than others to drop out of school" (1978, p.5). The 1980 Census data on the proportions of students two or more years older than the model age at the grade level in which they are enrolled--the age of the largest number of students in that grade-seem to support this expectation for Hispanics but not for Blacks.

Blacks and Hispanics are almost equally behind their White classmates throughout the years they remain in school. Nevertheless, as indicated earlier in the paper, Hispanics are twice as likely as Blacks to drop out of school and many apparently do so as soon as they reach the legal school-leaving age.

In the fourth grade in 1980, 10 percent of Black and Hispanic students and 6 percent of White students were two or more years older than the model age of eight. In the eighth grade, 18 percent of Blacks, 19 percent of Hispanics and 10 percent of White students were two or more years older than the model age of thirteen. More than twice as many Black and Hispanic as White eighth graders, proportionally, were already school-leaving age, 16, (7 percent in comparison with 3 percent of Whites) and, at this point, as demonstrated by the data on the years of schooling completed by dropouts, many more Hispanics than Blacks, proportionally, leave school. In the ninth to eleventh grades, Blacks and Hispanics were twice as likely as their White classmates to be overaged (17 to 20 percent in comparison with 9 percent). In grade twelve the proportions of those overaged jumped to nearly a quarter of Blacks and Hispanics and 11 percent of Whites, as many young people, close to graduation, decided to stay in school to finish (Census 1984, table 260).

Poverty of Families With Children Under Age Eighteen

Black and Hispanic school children are much more likely to come from families with incomes below the poverty level than White school children are. In the 1980 Census, 36 percent of Black families and 27 percent of Hispanic families with children under age 18 reported incomes below the poverty level for their size and circumstances. In comparison, only 10 percent of White families with children under age 18 reported incomes below the poverty level. White families in poverty have fewer children to support than either Black or Hispanic families: 2.24 children in 1980 in comparison with 2.57 children in Black families in poverty and 2.61 children in Hispanic families. Clearly, many families need the additional income which young people who drop out of school to work might provide, even though, just as clearly, the young people sacrifice opportunities and future earnings by not finishing high school (Census 1984, tables 297 and 309).

Employment Expectations and Experiences of Teenagers

Many teenage dropouts do obtain work. Some fail to find work and become part of the statistics on the high unemployment of young people, especially minorities. Other young people who leave school without graduating from high school become "discouraged workers." They either never seek work or they fail to find it and cease looking. Youth who leave school before graduation are much less likely to be working and more likely to be "discouraged workers" than high school graduates. However, there are significant differences in employment rates and "discouraged workers" rates of White, Black and Hispanic high school graduates, as well as of dropouts in these groups. There are also differences in the "pay-offs" of education in the form of earnings of the young Whites, Blacks and Hispanics who find work. Although these differences undoubtedly influence the decisions of young people on whether to continue in school or to leave, there is no way to measure their effect.

Most White and Hispanic teenage dropouts either find work or continue actively seeking it. In contrast, the majority of Black dropouts become "discouraged workers." They drop out of school and out of the labor force as well. In 1980, the comparative civilian employment rates for dropouts, aged 16 to 19, were: for Whites and Hispanics, 44 percent; for Blacks 23 percent. The "discouraged worker" rates were: for Whites, 40 percent; for Hispanics, 45 percent, and for Blacks, 60 percent, a staggering three out of five.

Among high school graduates not continuing their education, Hispanics are less likely, and Blacks much less likely, to be employed, and both groups are considerably more likely to be "discouraged workers," than Whites. The comparative 1980 employment rates for 16-to-19-year-old graduates not continuing their education were: for Whites, 74 percent; for Hispanics, 63 percent, and for Blacks 46 percent. The "discouraged worker" rates were: for Whites, 16 percent; for Hispanics, 27 percent, and for Blacks, 38 percent. (Census 1983, tables 102, 143 and 153.

The difference in the labor force status of similarly educated White, Black and Hispanic youth are exacerbated by the differences in the "pay-offs" of education for employed Whites, Blacks and Hispanics. In 1979, Black male high school graduates with no postsecondary education and drop-outs who had completed one to three years of high school, aged 18 to 24, earned 75 cents for every dollar earned by similarly educated White males in that age group on the average. Hispanic male graduates earned 88 cents for every dollar earned by Whites. However, Hispanic dropouts who stayed in school at least until grade nine earned about as much as their White contemporaries with one to three years of high school education and Hispanic males with fewer than eight years of schooling earned more than similarly educated Whites (Census 1984: table 296).

School Programs and Policies and Dropouts

School programs and policies can make a difference. According to the Texas study, strategies which have been found in the literature to be effective in retaining potential dropouts include basic skills teaching, training in survival skills, individualized instruction and strengthened counseling and guidance. Effective programs include those combining work and study and those which involve the community, business and parents working in partnership. Effective programs are staffed by committed and caring teachers who have high expectations for their students (IDRA 1986:40). Basic skills teaching and individualized instruction for Hispanic and other language minority students must take into account their special language needs if the programs are to be successful.

The data used for this paper make possible broad generalizations about how minorities are faring in U.S. schools. These data suggest that too many youngsters--and, in particular, too many minority youngsters--are leaving school inadequately prepared to obtain meaningful employment and to realize their potential in society. The data suggests that school

administrators, teachers and parents need to devote more effort to learning why youth fall behind and why they leave school before graduation and to devising remedies to address the problems.

School policies can serve as disincentives to the retention of potential dropouts. Much attention has been paid in recent years to the quality of secondary schooling in the United States. One of the results of this attention has been the institution of minimum competency tests for high school graduation. These may assure that all graduates are prepared for college or other postsecondary experiences but they may also contribute to higher dropout rates, especially among minority students and those having difficulties with English. The dropout rate will also increase if students who believe they cannot pass the tests give up and drop out, or if school administrators, perceiving testing as an accountability device, are deterred from making needed efforts to retain students whom they believe to be otherwise marginal. Citing its finding that opportunities and incentives for the non-college bound have actually been reduced in recent years, the Hispanic Policy Development Project states that "efforts to improve the quality of education must be complemented by efforts to retain students in school; otherwise the nation will pay in a variety of ways to support less-than-productive adults" (1986, p.4).

Much more must be done, not just for dropouts or potential dropouts who will terminate their education in high school, but for those who, given a chance, will opt for higher education. It is hoped that studies such as this, which document the extent of the problem and its differential effects on minority students, will stimulate additional efforts.

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